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CASTRATING AND DOCKING LAMBS



THE LARGEST PART of the returns from farm flocks is derived from the sale of lambs.

That this income may be as large as possible, it is necessary to have the lambs in the best possible market condition.

Ram lambs and undocked lambs are usually discriminated against on the markets, because they lack a uniform and attractive appearance and, in the case of uncastrated males, because they usually produce, under corresponding conditions, less satisfactory or lower grade carcasses than do ewe and wether lambs.

Flocks containing ram lambs usually make smaller weight and flesh gains than do flocks of ewe and wether lambs.

This bulletin tells how the operation of castration and docking can be done safely and effectively on the farm.

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CASTRATING AND DOCKING LAMBS

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ESSENTIALS IN THE PRODUCTION OF A GOOD LAMB CARCASS

THE SHEEP INDUSTRY depends for a large part of its returns upon the lambs produced from the flock. The meat phase of the industry is of great importance and bears a direct relation to the profits from the flock. Three essentials are necessary to produce desirable lamb carcasses—good breeding, proper feeding, docking, and castration of the males. The most desirable and therefore the most profitable lamb carcasses cannot as a rule be produced from lambs that have not been docked and, in the case of males, castrated (fig. 1).

Agencies interested in the sheep business are making an effort to bring the desirability of lamb in the diet to the attention of the American public. If this effort is to have its intended effect, the lambs must be properly bred and fed, and their carcasses must be of a desirable character. Since beef, pork, and lamb sell at somewhat similar prices, an increased consumption of lamb is dependent on a supply that is at least as satisfactory as the supply of other meats.

A farmer does not market his bull calves as bulls, nor his boar pigs as boars. Why, therefore, should he market his male lambs as rams rather than as wethers? Upon a more general practice of castration in the farm flocks hinge real profits and a more general success. If the industry is to yield satisfactory returns, the docking of lambs and the castration of males not intended for breeding purposes must be done at the proper time.

DECREASE IN MARKETINGS OF UNDOCKED AND UNCASTRATED FARM LAMBS

One of the most significant developments in livestock production and marketing in recent years has been the improvement in the quality and condition of native or farm-flock lamb marketings. This has come about largely because producers have given more

¹ G. H. Bedell, joint author of the original bulletin, resigned from the Bureau of Animal Industry in 1920.

attention to the docking of their lambs and the castration of the males.

According to trade opinion, within the last 5 or 6 years the proportion of uncastrated farm-flock lambs marketed at the leading public markets has decreased approximately 25 percent. It is esti-



FIGURE 1.—Which carcass do you prefer?

Wether carcass, smooth in the shoulder, short in neck, deep and thick over loin and in the leg, well finished and uniformly covered.

Bucky carcass, coarse in neck and shoulders, light in loin and leg, lacks covering and proper finish.

mated that not more than 7 or 8 percent of all native male lambs reaching the seven largest midwestern markets during 1934 were marketed as ram lambs, whereas 10 years ago the proportion of ram lambs was 75 percent at some markets. Probably the chief reasons for this significant change are changes in trade practices at the largest market center and the pushing of a campaign designed primarily to expand lamb consumption through bettering the quality of the product.

CHANGES IN TRADE PRACTICES

Generally speaking, all species, classes, and grades of livestock are bought and sold according to their merits as judged by their ap-

parent ability to answer the intended purposes. In the case of lambs bought for slaughter, the quality or grade of the carcasses they are expected to produce and the dressed weight of such carcasses in proportion to the live weight of the animals (when associated with their cost, live and dressed, and the market value of the animals and their products) are of primary importance to the purchaser. Yet until recent years, as a rule, ram lambs as a class were not sorted from lots containing ewe and wether lambs and were not sold on a different price basis. The market value of a shipment containing ram lambs was generally adjudged by buyer and seller to the best of their ability, on the basis of their estimates of the value of the shipment in its entirety, or the lot was priced and sold with an agreed-upon number sorted out at a different price. In the latter case, the "out" lambs were selected chiefly according to grade and weight, rather than sex.

It is now the prevailing practice at most market centers to make a second sorting of shipments that contain ram lambs. The second sorting, or the sort from the original "top cut", is based on sex. Through it the ram lambs are removed and are generally cleared at a previously agreed-upon price discount from the price paid for the top cut of the ewe and wether lambs in the same shipment. This discount is usually \$1 per hundredweight.

PRICE DISCRIMINATION AGAINST RAM LAMBS

At most markets at which farm-flock lambs are received and sold in considerable volume, the discount against ram lambs usually becomes effective between May 1 and June 1, and is used rather strictly thereafter throughout the year. This means that before the discount is first applied and without price penalty, many young, milk-fat ram lambs can be marketed from early producing sections. It is generally agreed that such young lambs, if marketed at weights below 80 pounds, and especially under 75 pounds, have not developed the sexual characteristics found in older and heavier ram lambs. When undesirable ram characteristics (such as thick, bucky necks and prominent shoulders) become apparent, the quality of the meat is changed and the market value of the carcass is lowered.

Whatever may be the merits or demerits of a trade practice that fixes a flat per hundredweight price discount for ram lambs, regardless of grade, weight, or age at the time such lambs are marketed, the fact remains that the practice has had far-reaching effect in promoting the castration of male lambs in farm flocks. The general standard of quality of dressed lambs has thereby been so raised as to help to expand the consumer demand for lamb meat, which, in turn, has helped to maintain a materially higher price, both for live lambs and the dressed product, than would otherwise have been received. For that reason the plan appears to have gained the support of the great majority of those who are mindful of the best interests of lamb producers generally.

Shipments of lambs carrying any appreciable number of uncastrated males have apparently always been subject to price discrimination. Until recent years the discount took place, as a rule, in the market price of such shipments as a whole. Under this system, ram lambs (other than extremely heavy, coarse animals and those in such

poor flesh condition as to be thrown out with the so-called "eulls" or "seconds") were usually sold and weighed with the top cuts of a shipment. This practice often caused farmers and shippers to say that they received as much for their buck lambs as they did for their ewe and wether lambs. But that was seldom the case for, although the bucks were not sorted out and sold separately at a lower price, their presence in a load was taken into account, and a lower price was paid for the shipment as a whole. Thus the ewe and wether lambs had to bring up the average price for the load, and the producer lost, as he does today, because he failed to castrate.

Buyers say that a finished load of ewe and wether lambs, comparatively uniform in weight and quality, is really worth the price



FIGURE 2.—Cutting off end of scrotum.

premium it usually commands over loads carrying some ram lambs. The truth of this assertion, so far as it applies to other than young lambs marketed in milk-fat condition and at average weights from around 80 or 75 pounds down, is well indicated by the market for the dressed product. It is further indicated by the competition that is usually displayed between buyers of lambs on foot for well-finished ewe and wether lambs as compared with loads containing buck lambs, even at the price discounts which the latter must usually take. Besides the added value, for slaughter, of ewe and wether lambs over ram lambs, the producer who docks all his lambs and alters the males has a product that, if not in good killing condition,

often attracts feeder buyers. Ewe lambs that have been docked are always preferred by those who are buying for breeding purposes. There is practically no competition for ram lambs for use as feeders.

Another important reason for castration is found in the well-established fact that better weight gains are made in the average flock when the ram lambs are castrated than under corresponding conditions as to feed and care when such lambs are permitted to mature to the age of 5 or 6 months. Experienced lamb producers and feeders recognize the fact that the more quiet their lambs are kept, the better gains they make. Even a few rams that have attained sufficient age and size to develop male characteristics cause



FIGURE 3.—Testicles exposed.

annoyance and restlessness in the entire flock, which tends to keep all the lambs from making as satisfactory weight and flesh gains as might otherwise be expected.

CASTRATING AND DOCKING USUAL IN RANGE FLOCKS

The custom of docking all lambs and castrating the males, other than those retained for breeding purposes, is almost universal in the range flocks. This is generally believed to be the reason that lambs produced on the western ranges have usually outsold natives or farm-

flock lambs on the slaughter market. Within the last few years, however, since the practice of docking native lambs and castrating the males has become much more general, the price premium formerly brought by range lambs over ewe and wether native lambs of corresponding weight and grade has practically disappeared on most markets. As a matter of fact, well-bred and well-finished ewe and wether farm-flock lambs now frequently sell at as good prices as do top consignments from the range and sometimes at higher prices. It is true that uniformity in breeding, in the great majority of instances, favors western-range lambs, but it is certain that had the flockmasters of the West not found castration and docking of lambs to be profitable these practices would not be so generally followed in that great lamb-producing region.



FIGURE 4.—Pulling out testicles with adhering cords.

METHODS OF CASTRATION

Castration is not dangerous if a little care is used. It can be performed by any careful person who will follow directions. Lambs should be castrated when they are from 7 to 14 days old. Choose a bright day; do not castrate lambs on a damp, chilly, or rainy day. Select from the flock all lambs that are to be castrated and fence them off so they can be caught without undue excitement. Never worry or chase lambs before performing the operation. Provide a clean stall or pen for them to go back to after the operation is performed. The operator's hands must be clean and the knife disinfected.

The lamb should be held against the body, as shown in figure 2. Cut off the lower one-third of the scrotum, or bag, so as to permit

drainage. Then expose the testicles, as shown in figure 3, and with the left hand force them out, holding them in this position by a firm grip between the thumb and fingers, which are held close to the ab-



FIGURE 5.—Applying an antiseptic.

domen of the lamb. Next, grasp the testicles firmly between the thumb and fingers of the right hand, as in figure 4, and draw them out with the adhering cords. The work should be done quickly but

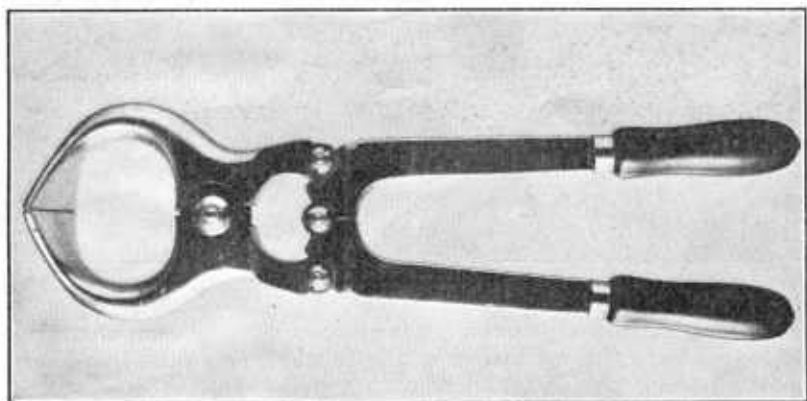


FIGURE 6.—Type of pincers used for bloodless castration. The jaws of the pincers do not come entirely together and therefore do not break the skin.

not roughly, and the testicles and adhering cords should be drawn out with a steady pull. The wound should then be washed with a

good antiseptic, such as a weak carbolic solution, or a creolin or lysol preparation, as shown in figure 5.

When lambs are more than 3 weeks old before the operation is performed, the cords should not be pulled out but should be scraped off with a knife back of the testicle. The scraping is done to prevent excessive bleeding.

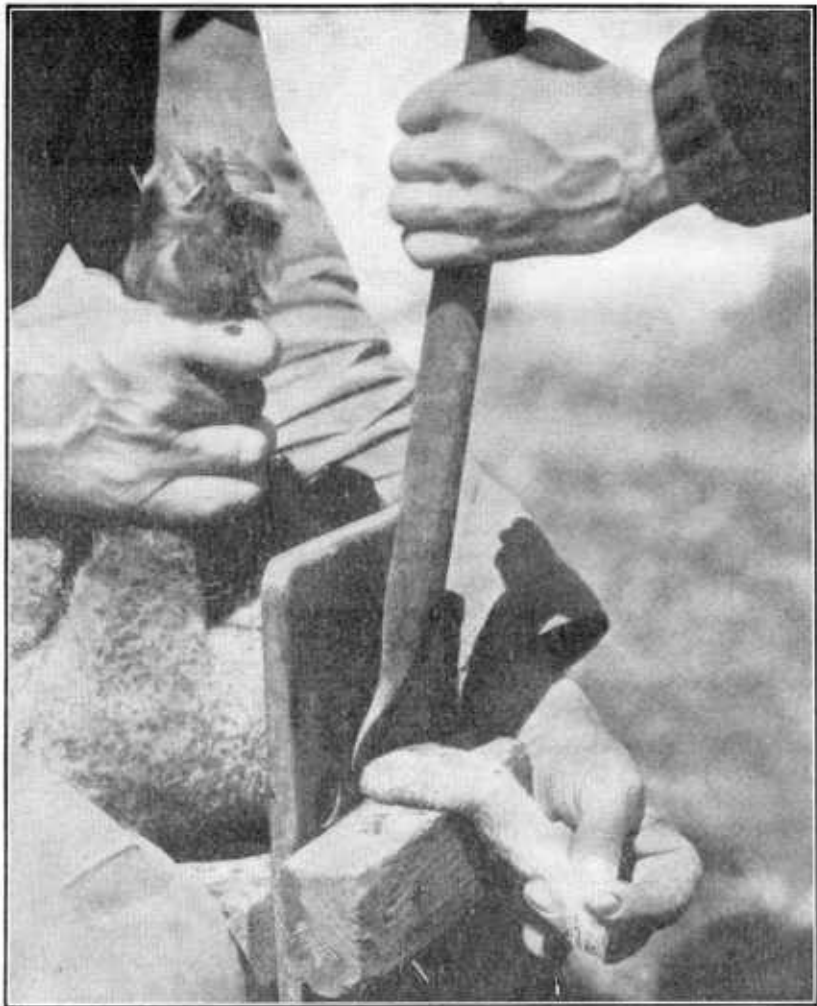


FIGURE 7.—Docking with heated chisel.

Lambs should be kept quiet after they have been castrated. It is best to perform the operation in the morning, so that they can be watched during the day and attention given any that become too weak from loss of blood.

A bloodless method of castration in which special pincers (fig. 6) are used is sometimes advocated. The pincers crush the cord but do

not break the skin. When properly performed, this is a very satisfactory method of castrating. However, the proper use of instruments of this type requires more than average skill, and unless the operation is effective much damage may be done when the male lambs are permitted to run with the flock after treatment. For this reason the bloodless method is not generally advocated as a farm practice. However, for the castration of mature animals, or for use in sections of the country in which screwworms are prevalent, these instruments are especially desirable. Since the usual operation under those conditions entails a certain amount of risk, bloodless castration is strongly recommended, even if the services of a veterinarian or someone else experienced in using this type of instrument are not available.

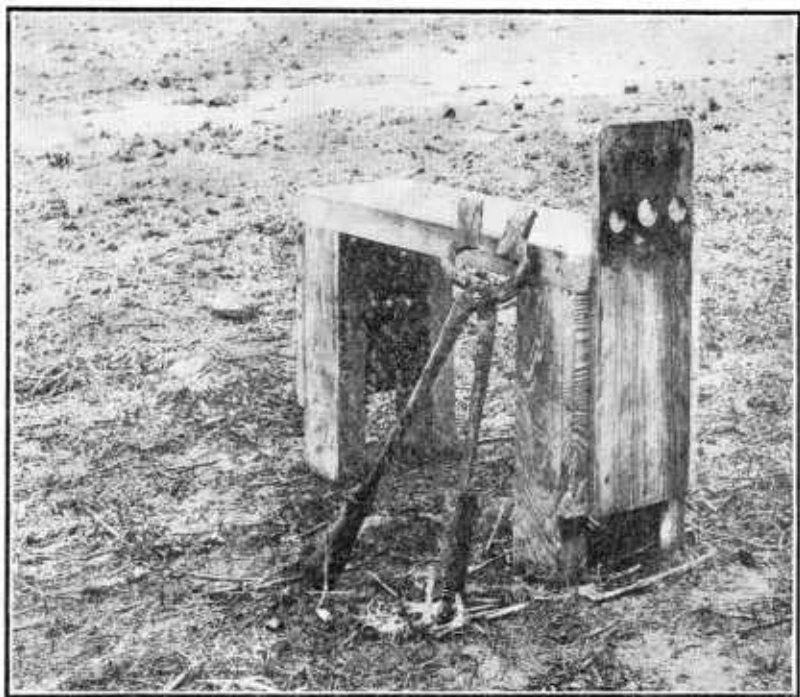


FIGURE 8.—Equipment for docking with heated irons.

METHODS OF DOCKING

If care is used, lambs can be docked at the same time they are castrated. If both operations are performed at the same time, labor is saved, as the lambs will have to be caught only once. It should be a uniform practice to dock when the lambs are from 7 to 14 days old.

The lamb's tail renders no substantial benefit to the animal. On the contrary, its presence is injurious because of the filth that accumulates around and beneath it. Moreover, lambs are more attractive, and they look deeper in the leg and twist if the tail is docked. Females with full-length tails are likely to fail to breed.

Usually the best way to dock a lamb is with the hot docking chisel (fig. 7). For best results the chisel should be heated only to a cherry-red color, as lambs bleed when the chisel is too hot.

Other methods of performing this operation are the use of docking irons (figs. 8 and 9) or a sharp knife.

When hot docking pincers or docking chisels are properly used, no danger need be feared from loss of blood. Old sheep can be docked successfully in this way. The pincers should be heated to a cherry-red heat, not hotter, and the tail seared off 1 to 1½ inches from the body (fig. 9). The wound will be seared over and no blood lost. When the irons are used at proper temperature the wound will heal satisfactorily, but probably not so quickly as when



FIGURE 9.—Docking with heated irons.

the knife is used. The wound is also sterilized and needs no further attention except in warm weather, when some standard preparation for repelling flies should be used. When the lambs are in a pen near at hand, with one man to catch them and another to hold them, from 9 to 12 lambs can be docked without heating the irons again.

The lambs should be watched for a few days to see that they are recovering from the operation satisfactorily.

When docking with the knife, the operator, by feeling on the inside of the tail, first locates the joint to be cut, which is about $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches from the body. He should then push the skin on the tail back toward the body of the lamb so as to leave some surplus skin to grow over the stub. The cut should be made quickly from the underside of the tail toward the top or woolly side. If a lamb should bleed too much a piece of cord may be tied very tightly on the stub of the tail close to the body, to stop the bleeding, but the cord must be removed in a few hours or the tail will slough off.

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